PAGE ONE

PREY MEXT

NEWS

ANDOVER

BOLTON

COVENTRY

EAST HARTFORD

EAST WINDSOR

ELLINGTON

ENFLËLD

HEBRON

MANCHESTER

SOMERS

SOUTH WINDSOR

STAFFORD

SUFFIELD

TOLLAND

VERNON

WINDSOR

WINDSON LOCKS



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EH football field plan faces cleanup issues

By Howard French
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EAST HARTFORD - If a football stadium originally planned for the Adriaen's Landing project in Hartford is to be built instead on Pratt & Whitney's Rentschler Field here, its planners will need to deal with ongoing pollution cleanup efforts.

The change in the stadium plan came Wednesday after Gov. John G. Rowland and United Technologies Corp. Chairman George David signed a memorandum of understanding that could lead to UTC donating 60 to 75 acres of the roughly 650-acre Rentschler site to the state.

Rowland would not confirm details prior to a press conference today, but said Wednesday that there have been concerns with the current plans for a 35,000-seat, 240-foot-high domed football stadium in the 33-acre Adriaen's Landing project. The plan also calls for a convention center, hotel and shopping district.

"We recognize some of those concerns, and tomorrow we'll address them," Rowland told WVIT-TV30 in West Hartford.

Moving the stadium to East Hartford would free up space in the Adriaen's Landing project for other development.

"This is a very small parcel that we have back here," Hartford Mayor Michael P. Peters told WFSB-TV3 in Hartford. "I think the governor is making the right choice, and I think he has talked to a lot of people about it."

UConn needs a stadium with at least 30,000 seats to upgrade its football program from Division I-AA to Division I-A. The school has received a waiver from the NCAA to play at its current 16,200-seat stadium while a larger one is being built.

News

UConn could be playing in an East Hartford stadium by 2003.

Toxics, ordnance concerns

UConn athletic director Lew Perkins said the East Hartford site, with easy access to Interstate 84 and Route 2, would resolve environmental and design problems that have delayed a Hartford stadium. Those problems were cited by The New England Patriots last year when they decided to pull out of the stadium project.

"We're really excited about it because it resolves all the issues," Perkins said. "There are no environmental problems, from what I'm told. We can build a good size stadium there."

But initial reports on the project have omitted any mention of a variety of pollution problems at the site over the years.

In January, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers disclosed that the agency is reviewing records of Pratt's Rentschler Field to determine whether there are any unexploded World War II-vintage bombs or other forgotten ordnance buried there.

And the federal Environmental Protection Agency is working with Pratt to conclude a 4-year-long project designed to remove toxins from the soil at the site.

And even if the Army Corps ultimately doesn't find enough evidence to push for a broader investigation of wartime ordnance, such properties can never be given an absolutely clear record, a Corps official has said.

William Holtham, a program manager for the Army Corps' Defense Environmental Restoration Program at the agency's New England District offices in Concord, Mass., said last winter there is always a chance that some leftover bombs and ammunition could have been buried at such sites by individuals during the war who had no authority to do so and left no official record.

"You can never, ever say the place is safe," Holtham said.
"Who's to say what might be in the ground?"

Holtham could not be reached today for additional comment on the status of the Rentschler investigation.

And Pratt spokesman Gary Minor said today he knows of no contact between Pratt and the Army Corps about the investigation.

During the war years, Rentschler housed an anti-aircraft battery and the ammunition storage that goes with it, according to the Army Corps. The airfield also was a temporary base for the 65th Squadron of the 57th Fighter Group, which operated training flights and patrols with what were then Army Air Corps fighter planes.

Cleanup removed soil

But in a second pollution-related problem, the EPA has been working with Pratt for years to deal with underground pollutants at the field.

The pollutants include beryllium, a metallic chemical element used to strengthen lightweight alloys. It can produce skin-irritating fumes and cause lung cancer, according to the "Rapid Guide to Hazardous Chemicals in the Workplace."

Pratt has removed truckloads of soil from the site over the past four years. And Pratt's Minor said today the project is on target for an expected conclusion in 2000.

"We're on our way to completing that voluntary cleanup," Minor said.

UTC has been trying since 1994 to find a buyer for Rentschler, which had been an airfield used by Pratt for at least 50 years. It was abandoned in 1994 when UTC moved its fleet of corporate aircraft to the general aviation section of Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks.

But all efforts to develop the tract - which has been touted as one of the most desirable development sites between Boston and New York - have failed. It has been pitched for everything from an industrial park to a motor raceway.

More recently, it was mentioned in 1997 as a prime location for a proposed Six Flags Amusement Park.

But by April 1998, the push to sell Rentschler to the Six Flags chain had collapsed when Six Flags was bought by Premier Parks Inc. - the Oklahoma-based owners of Riverside Park in Agawam, Mass., only a half-hour drive up Interstate 91 from the Hartford area.